

# The Professional Identity Experiences of LIS Graduates in Non-Library Roles Can Be Described by the Theory of Personalizing Professionalism

Fraser-Arnott, M. (2017, May 17). Personalizing professionalism: The professional identity experiences of LIS graduates in non-library roles. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0961000617709062>

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*Evidence Summary*

**The Professional Identity Experiences of LIS Graduates in Non-Library Roles Can Be Described by the Theory of Personalizing Professionalism**

**A Review of:**

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**Abstract**

**Objective** – To produce a theory that captures the professional identity experiences of library and information science (LIS) graduates employed in non-library roles.

**Design** – Data collection and analysis were conducted using semi-structured interviews and grounded theory methodology.

**Setting** – A variety of industry sectors located in the United States or Canada.

**Subjects** – Twenty professionals with Master's degrees in LIS employed in non-library roles.

**Method** – This study used the Glaserian Grounded Theory methodology, which requires constant theoretical sampling and comparison until no new data is found in any coding category. The researcher utilized two types of sampling in this study: snowball or chain referral sampling, and theoretical sampling. These techniques allowed the researcher to build a potential list of participants from a difficult to reach population. Study data was collected through semi-structured interviews divided into three sections: 1) participants were asked to describe their career experiences from their decision to attend library school to the present; 2) follow-up questions by the researcher in response to comments made by participants during the

first phase; 3) questions listed in an interview guide that examined educational experiences, communities, and how participants identify themselves as professionals.

**Main Results** – Study results produced the theory of Personalizing Professionalism, which suggests that each individual possess two identities that interact with one another throughout the course of one's career. The first is an internal appraisal of self that represents who one is as a professional. It is developed as a result of socialization in the profession and an understanding of personal motivations and interests. The second is an externally expressed identity that represents how an individual presents himself or herself to achieve professional goals. This can include self-imposed labels, such as "librarian", or strategies used to find a path within the profession. This process involves reflections and actions aimed at identifying what type of professional to be and steps required to achieve goals.

The results also indicate that interactions with others impact an individual's internal appraisal of self and externally expressed identity. Areas of conflict were identified when commonly held views of how a professional identity should be expressed did not match the identity that an individual developed or displayed to others. When conflicts arose, individuals used a variety of strategies to resolve the discrepancy between internal and external identities: assimilation, attempting to influence or change the perceptions of the group, or withdrawal.

In terms of self-identifying as a librarian, the study found that participants who chose the term as a professional label believed that the work they do in non-library settings was still compatible with their definition of what it meant to be a librarian. Participants who identified as librarians some of the time and by their job title at other times did so based on an evaluation of which label would best advance their position with a given audience. Finally, participants who chose not to use the label of librarian had never internally associated with the role or job title; these individuals

completed a LIS program to gain transferable skills or qualify for a wide variety of employment opportunities.

**Conclusion** – The theory of Personalizing Professionalism provides insight into the development and expression of professional identity experiences when LIS graduates work in non-library roles. The results have value to practitioners and educators who market LIS programs or develop course content. For instance, in the future greater emphasis could be placed on transferable skill sets that are of value to roles outside of traditional library settings. Many participants described potential or actual conflicts when trying to place themselves within the LIS community because new ideas of what it means to be a "librarian" were rejected, leading to feelings of exclusion. Over time, this could lead to a detrimental loss of innovation and ideas.

### **Commentary**

To date, researchers have not examined how the professional identities of LIS graduates working in non-library settings are developed or expressed. The study at hand fills this research gap and supports what is known regarding the development of professional identity: it is shaped by values and attitudes held by others of that affiliation, alongside perceptions of context within a professional community (Billot, 2010; Gibson, 2010). Because the study is limited to LIS graduates, it provides value to the information management profession in particular.

The researcher introduces the theory of Personalizing Professionalism, which was developed over the course of the study. This theory states that LIS graduates in non-library roles develop an "internal appraisal of self which represents an individual's assessment of who they 'really' are as a professional" along with an externally expressed identity, which represents "who that individual presents him or herself to be" (p. 5). The theory brings valuable insight to conversations regarding transferable skill sets, socialization within professional communities, and the career decision-making process.

While the ideas expressed in this research, particularly those related to the theory of Personalizing Professionalism, no doubt have value to the information management community, there is an unfortunate lack of discussion regarding the methodology. For instance, although the researcher describes the method used to generate a list of potential participants, she does not discuss the recruitment process or the response rate to requests for participation. Also, there is no mention of how many participants completed all three phases of the interview process. A detailed discussion on methodology would add value to the paper and allow for reproducibility of the study.

In regard to data collection and analysis, it is not clear how the interviews were conducted (e.g., by phone or in person), the length of each session, and whether the sessions were recorded and transcribed. Also, the researcher stated that qualitative data was coded to identify themes, yet there was no discussion regarding coding techniques, software used to conduct analysis, or trends that emerged in the data set. Finally, since this is the first study of its kind, it would have been useful to include the interview guide in an appendix. Because of the omissions regarding the general methodology of the study, it will be difficult for other researchers to replicate the study or build on the work that has been done. This is truly unfortunate as it would be valuable to explore the topic in greater detail by

expanding the sample size or comparing the results of different demographic groups.

Despite these limitations, the research introduces an important topic to the information management community. As the job market continues to evolve, it is essential to understand how graduates craft a professional identity and whether or not they continue to self-identify as librarians over the course of their careers. Such insights provide all information managers with greater knowledge regarding the strengths and limitations of the professional community and how to foster feelings of membership in the community going forward.

## References

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